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Editorial – How Many is Too Much?

Are we producing too many Ph.Ds? This has become a much asked question; for those of us who believe in education there can be only one answer. Of course, we may be producing too many Ph.Ds for the jobs we are prepared to pay them to do; rather, we may be producing too few jobs or more correctly too few salaries. There can be no question that the jobs are there and need doing – a great many of them, and the need is too often desperate. We are also, of course, producing too many Ph.Ds in the same sense that we are producing too many people; many of our Ph.Ds could be contributing to a solution to this urgent problem, some indeed are; unpaid. But the need to reduce our population carries with it not only the opportunity but the obligation to do so selectively; by keeping the cream and discarding the skimmed milk and learning to tell the difference. And if this is not a task that calls for the highest level of education then there is none such.

The reduction of human population will take time and time is running out, for some small part of our excessive population, which regards itself as cream, is excessively producing and excessively consuming and excessively polluting its environment and will too soon (or too late, depending on your viewpoint) poison itself off and thus effect a pathetically small reduction in our total population. The remainder of the human population meanwhile is excessively reproducing, and may achieve the same end in a similarly short time and effect a bigger reduction in our total population. If the haves and the have-nots achieve these ends at the same time, global chaos must surely follow, and perhaps man's departure from this earthly scene will be more spectacular than his arrival was. It is interesting to speculate on the course of events should either group eliminate itself well ahead of the other. The economic problems of production and consumption, the biochemical and ecological problems of pollution and environmental quality, the biological, sociological, and psychological problems of population control, are all complex. They are basic and long term problems and their solution will call for the cooperation of many men and women with the highest level of education in many fields for many years to come.

When our current problems are solved and our reduced population can sustain itself on a maximum of technology and a minimum of effort, there will be, we are told, the problem of how to use our leisure. Education, it may be predicted, will lead us out of this one too.

It seems unarguable that nobody should be denied the opportunity to develop whatever intellectual potential he was born with to the highest level possible. If this be so, the number of Ph.Ds we produce is determined by our population and its genetical make-up. Of course by changing the nature of the Ph.D. degree we could produce more or less people with it, and standards are difficult of definition and far from absolute. We might – and perhaps should – raise our standards and produce fewer Ph.Ds. We might lower them, by requiring no imagination or original thought, insisting on nothing but technological production and training for a specific occupation or activity, and produce many more “Ph.Ds”. To some small extent, doubtless, supply and demand will occasion some fluctuation in standards: to be resisted. So perhaps some who enquire whether we are producing too many Ph.Ds should be asking instead whether we are lowering our standards.

This question is often asked in a rather local frame of reference, and relates to local availability of positions for which a salary which Ph.Ds have learned to expect is offered. But a Ph.D. is neither a local nor an economic degree; as an international document it is far more versatile and valuable than most national currencies and passports, but as a money maker it ranks below degrees in medicine and engineering – fields in which Ph.D. degrees are relatively rare – not to mention, of course, fraudulent activities in many fields, which depend on congenital cunning rather than education of any kind. Regardless of the mood of the moment, those who embark on a Ph.D. program have always committed themselves to thinking in international terms. Neither intellect nor education have ever been necessarily the handmaidens of wealth.

We may admit that in these special circumstances our initial question could be answered in the affirmative, and admit, too, that persons involved in the production of Ph.Ds may be biased. But when a person with every appearance of intellectual potential which could be developed to a level justifying the award of a Ph.D. degree of impeccable standard presents himself, has anybody a right to deny him an opportunity to try? We can no more produce too many Ph.Ds than we can have too much education, least of all, perhaps, in the life sciences.

Brian Hocking